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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/2019
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SUBJECT: EXPLOSION AT POLICAN HIGHLIGHTS UNRESOLVED
SECURITY CONCERNS IN DEMIL

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen Cristina for reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d)

11. (C) Summary. On January 6, an employee of the Polican Mechanical Plant was killed when hit by the accidental explosion of a mortar fuse. Polican is one of two sites (along with the Mjekes Explosives Factory) designated for industrial demilitarization, planned to begin this month. U.S. contractors, through PM/WRA funding, will supervise a line at Polican to dismantle 82mm rounds. Due to the Gerdec tragedy, demilitarization has received increased public scrutiny, and the Ministry of Defense was quick to respond with a detailed press statement that effectively calmed public opinion. The accident highlights continuing concerns about responsibility for safety and security standards at the demol facilities. It could also potentially cause an already skittish military to become even more so, but the reaction of the MOD's General Secretary - the new head of demol coordination - has been promising to date. End Summary.

THE INCIDENT -----

12. (U) According to a public statement by the Ministry of Defense, at 8:10 a.m. six employees of Polican were cleaning the area outside the demol buildings at Polican of waste from previous demol activities, when to keep warm they lit a fire using crates that used to contain 57mm mortar rounds. Unfortunately, one crate still contained a mortar fuse. The fuse lit, and the explosion hit employee Suzana Kapxhiu in the side of the head. Kapxhiu later died on the way to the Polican hospital before receiving first aid. One other employee suffered minor wounds. The Ministry of Defense declared the accident the result of the careless neglect of strict safety rules (fires are not allowed within the Polican facility).

MOD PR STRATEGY -----

13. (U) An incident which had the potential of stirring up a media storm was quickly calmed by a proactive MoD press office, an improvement on the past. The next day, DefMin Oketa visited Polican, met with the director and with the family of the victim. He then held a press conference from Polican where he insisted on stricter safety standards and enforcement and promised to press forward with demol. (Comment: Overall, MoD press strategy concerning demol has improved markedly over the last several months, due in part to receptivity to coaching from Post,s Public Affairs Section).

¶4. (C) The press statement does raise some questions, though.

Most striking, it is unclear why there were 57mm rounds at Polican. Although the statement claimed that Polican has been dismantling 57mm rounds for the last four years, there is no record of this. The only official demil to occur at Polican was a 2006-2007 NAMSA project to demil 72mm rounds. US contractor Cubic, who has been coordinating the MoD's national demil plan, rightly points out that no one knows what "unofficial" demil was taking place before the Gerdec tragedy. In conclusion, the MoD stressed that the accident was not a result of demil activities, but of carelessness while cleaning the area. Although there have been some rumors that the accident was the result of a current "unofficial" demil project, this rumor has not gained much ground and is unlikely to do so.

SAFETY CONCERNS

¶5. (C) The incident highlights a continuing concern at Polican: who is responsible for enforcing safety standards. Like Mjekes and the Military Export Import Company (MEICO), while Polican is a government entity, it is self-financed and largely self-directed. It does not fall under military authority and the only military presence is there to guard the outer perimeter of the plant. Thus, the MoD to date has not assumed responsibility for safety standards or for providing emergency assistance (e.g. ambulance or first aid materials), and has insisted this is the responsibility of Polican and the U.S. contractor Armor Group. One solution advocated by MoD's J4 is to return Mjekes and Polican to the military structure so that the military can take full responsibility for demil activities. This, however, would

require significant time and legal reworking, and there is a fear that this could further stall commencement of industrial demil work.

NEW DEMIL COORDINATOR

¶6. (C) In mid-December, Defense Minister Oketa requested his recently appointed Secretary General Fiqiri Kupe to take charge of the MoD's demil working group. Demil Czar Fatmir Bozdo will continue in his position, but act more as an advisor to Kupe. Kupe was previously Oketa's legal advisor and is in his mid-thirties. Besides being a lawyer, he is also by profession a civil engineer like Oketa. Both are from Durres and went to the same university. According to Bozdo, Kupe has so far been aggressive in pushing progress on demil issues. In a January 6 meeting with Poloff and ODC, Kupe declared that legal issues have been resolved and Oketa has issued orders for agreements to be signed between Polican, Mjekes, the MoD and the U.S. contractor Armor Group.

After that, the MoD will develop a transport plan for the munitions, and Kupe expects industrial demilitarization at Mjekes (a line for 160mm rounds) and Polican (a line for 82mm rounds, supervised by Armor Group) to start in the next few weeks.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) While Kupe's predictions seem optimistic given previous delays, his attitude and authority within the MoD are promising. He readily placed responsibility for yesterday's tragedy on the Ministry of Defense and insisted that the accident should not slow down demil efforts or delay the commencement of work at Polican or Mjekes. The real proof, though, will be when demil finally begins.

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